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ABSTRACT

High student mobility seems to occur as frequently in rural districts as in urban districts, but little research has focused specifically on rural student mobility. Correlations between characteristics of rural communities, the current state of rural schools, and the factors that contribute to high student mobility suggest that student mobility is a substantial issue in rural areas. This issue becomes timely with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, which reauthorizes the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act's Education for Homeless Children and Youth. To comply with the Act, states and districts must recognize student mobility as a barrier to student achievement and address the implications. This paper discusses ways in which student mobility occurs, particular factors that increase the risk of rural families becoming mobile, and findings from research on student mobility. High student mobility negatively affects educational achievement for students and schools, creating an achievement gap between mobile and nonmobile students. Frequent relocation disrupts regular attendance, continuity of lesson content, and development of relationships with teachers and peers. In schools with higher mobility rates, classroom instruction is more likely to be review-oriented, and grade retention is more common. Initiatives to address mobility are underway in Minnesota, Indiana, Texas, and Illinois. Strategies to reduce the negative effects of mobility include professional development to increase staff awareness, identification of families in need, newcomer programs, efficient records transfer, supportive attendance and disciplinary policies, and outreach to parents and families. (Contains 20 references and 10 resources.) (SV)

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Student Mobility in Rural Communities:

What Are the Implications for Student Achievement?

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Student Mobility in Rural Communities:

What Are the Implications for Student Achievement?

Executive Summary

The No Child Left Behind Act, which reauthorizes the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act's Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY), gives high priority to minimizing the achievement gap between highly mobile students and their nonmobile peers. Inherent to the success of the McKinney-Vento Act is understanding student mobility as a contributor to this gap, its impact on academic success and the school district, and exploring ways to reduce mobility and/or lessen its negative effects.

High student mobility occurs as frequently in rural districts as it does in urban districts, but little research exists about the specific issue of rural student mobility.
By drawing correlations between characteristics of rural communities and the factors that contribute to high student mobility, it is easy to determine that rural administrators, as well as state and local education agencies, must address this issue.

This paper provides readers with a thorough understanding of student mobility—a research review that demonstrates the prevalence of mobility and its effect on students and schools, and highlights federal, state, and local initiatives that have been adopted. Also provided are suggestions, strategies, and additional resources that can be used by virtually any district in its efforts to comply with the McKinney-Vento Act.

Introduction

Nearly 12 million children changed residence in 1999-2000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001a). This phenomenon of "student mobility," although not a new concept, is gaining momentum as a contributing factor to the "academic achievement gaps" historically attributed to race, ethnicity, gender, and social/economic status. Student mobility, especially when combined with other contributing factors, can have detrimental effects on student achievement, schools, school districts, teachers, and other students. This policy paper focuses on the issue of student mobility in rural areas and its impact on academic achievement and school districts. It also highlights ways that communities, schools, district representatives, and parents can work together to prevent high rates of student mobility and/or lessen its negative effects.

Little research exists about the specific issue of *rural* student mobility, while much information is available about transient students, both generally and in urban settings. Correlations between characteristics that are typical of rural communities, the current state of rural schools, and student mobility suggest that student mobility is a substantial issue in rural areas and an issue that needs to be addressed by state and local education agencies.

Based upon interviews conducted with rural school districts and rural school association staff members in the NCREL region, there are varying degrees of awareness about the prevalence of factors contributing to student mobility and the rate at which it occurs in their districts. Most respondents could speculate that it is likely there are families in their districts who are residentially mobile and/or living in unaffordable or substandard housing, but many do not track student mobility rates.

The timeliness of this issue is even more apparent with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, which reauthorizes the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act's Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY). The overall mission of the No Child Left Behind Act is to ensure that every child in the United States is successful in school, and to close the achievement gap between highly mobile students and their nonmobile peers. To comply with the Act, states and districts must recognize student mobility as a barrier to success; understand how it impacts academic achievement; and understand its implications for schools, districts, teachers, transient students, and classmates. In addition, schools and districts must step up accountability for student achievement and learn ways to address the issue of student mobility.

Understanding Student Mobility

The U.S. Census Bureau (2001c) reported that 4.3 million Americans moved between March 1999 and March 2000. Increased mobility is highly correlated with low family income. The majority of reasons people move are income related. Reasons for moving include finding employment, job relocation, joining family and friends, escaping high crime rates, finding better schools, homelessness, leaving substandard or unaffordable housing, difficulties with landlords, poor domestic relationships, eviction, and/or property

condemnation (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001d). Children in poverty and those of migrant families can find themselves switching schools often because of the sheer nature of migrant work and the tendency for low-wage earners to jump from one job to another.

Student mobility can occur in the following variety of ways:

- A student may change residence without switching to a new school (remaining in district).
- A student may change residence and subsequently change his/her school (moving into a new district).
- Many residence and school changes that result from interstate or international relocation as happened from 1999 through 2000 when more than 240,000 people moved to the Midwest from abroad (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001b).
- With greater opportunities to exercise choice among public schools, a student may change his/her school without changing residence.

The mobility that results in a school change is the greatest threat to academic achievement and the school environment (Biernat & Jax, 2000).

Families in rural communities are at an increased risk of becoming mobile especially toward more urban locales in the following ways:

- Nearly all executive- and high-ranking managerial positions tend to be in cities.
- The "single industry" nature of rural communities (e.g., agriculture, mining) limits economic flexibility when the industry, or economic stronghold, of the community is in jeopardy.
- The single industry nature threatens the rural economy with sensitivity to fluctuating manufacturing and export rates.
- There is a current trend to "move urban."
- A higher rate of poverty exists in rural communities.
- Rural workers, on average, earn four-fifths of their urban counterparts' salary.
- Economic "booms" tend to benefit urban areas, but not rural communities (Stalker, 2001).

Undoubtedly, the children of poverty-stricken families are at greatest risk on three accounts—poverty increases the risk of academic failure; mobility increases the risk of academic failure; and poverty increases the risk of frequent mobility.

Fortunately for rural students, a residential move doesn't necessarily constitute a school change. With school districts covering a large geographic area, as is common in rural communities, it is possible for a family to move several miles from their home of origin and still remain in the same school district. In these instances, the negative effect of mobility on academic achievement is greatly decreased.

Student Mobility—The Statistics

Students in rural areas have an approximate mobility rate of 15—the same as the national average (U.S. Government Accounting Office, 1994). Coupled with recent reports that nearly half a million children in the rural Midwest are living in poverty, and thousands more are living just above the poverty line, the risk of frequent mobility and academic failure is heightened.

Here are the facts:

- The Midwestern region has a relatively high mobility rate, particularly related to the agricultural processing industry and migration of low-income people seeking low-wage jobs (Fitchen, 1994).
- A single mother; a young couple; or a never married, divorced, or separated individual is most vulnerable to becoming highly mobile (Fitchen, 1994).
- An estimated six million elementary school children change schools each year (Florida Division of Teaching and Learning, 2002).
- A move into a new school district accompanied approximately a quarter of all residential moves (Pribesh & Downey, 1999).
- There is a strong correlation between poverty and the risk of academic failure, and a strong correlation between poverty and frequent mobility (Wright, 1999).
- Frequent movers are more likely to exhibit behavioral issues and are more than twice as likely to have nutrition, health, or hygiene problems (U.S. Government Accounting Office, 1994).
- A strong relationship exists between levels of mobility and the relative strength of social support networks, such as family, church, other relatives, neighbors, friends, or outside agencies (Fitchen, 1994).
- A key to reducing mobility is access to decent low-cost housing (Fitchen, 1994).

Student Mobility's Effect on Academic Achievement

For children caught in the shuffle, frequent moves into different schools and/or homes can negatively impact academic performance. With poverty and mobility both

contributing to the achievement gap—and with poverty being highly correlated with mobility—understanding how these issues jeopardize achievement is critical.

Student mobility has a negative impact on educational achievement for students and schools, creating an achievement gap between mobile and nonmobile students. Frequent relocation interrupts regular attendance, continuity of lesson content, and the development of relationships with teachers and peers. In addition, high student mobility has a slowing effect on basic skills acquisition, creating a long-term risk of school failure and dropout. Another risk, because academic records are not always available, is inappropriate placement in a new school—placement in programs for the gifted and talented or in remedial classes when neither is appropriate (Biernat & Jax, 2000).

Research clearly indicates the negative effects of student mobility. Forty-one percent of highly mobile students are low achievers, compared with twenty-six percent of stable students. The more frequently a child changes his/her school, the greater the threat to academic achievement. Furthermore, according to the U.S. Government Accounting Office (1994), children who change schools more than three times before eighth grade are at least four times more likely to drop out of school. Another study found that successive school changes result in a cumulative academic lag—students who move more than three times in a six-year period can fall one full academic year behind stable students (Kerbow, 1996).

Children who are either homeless or from migrant families, by virtue of their situation, are most likely to be highly mobile. Whether moving within or between districts, homeless children generally have difficulty attending school regularly and can easily fall behind their peers because of transportation issues, untreated or unattended health issues, barriers to enrollment, or actual relocations (National Center for Homeless Education, 2001).

Data indicate that more than 750,000 migrant children and youth live in the United States. In the 1997-1998 school year and summer term, the Migrant Education Program served more than 600,000 migrant children (DiCerbo, 2001). The graduation rate of migrant children (50 percent) is even lower than the graduation rate of otherwise highly mobile students (60 percent) (National Association of State Directors of Migrant Education, 1994).

Complementary to academic success is social development and the formulation of relationships with peers and teachers. Moving often damages, or completely severes, important social ties that are useful for cognitive or social development (Pribesh & Downey, 1999).

Similarly, children who are frequent movers are 35 percent more likely to repeat a grade, not allowing them to progress at an age-appropriate level and subsequently jeopardizing established peer relationships.

Student Mobility Has Negative Effects for Transient Students, Schools, Teachers, and Classmates

- ✓ Mobility is associated with lower student achievement (Fowler-Finn, 2001).
- ✓ An achievement gap exists between schools with a high mobility rate and those that are more stable (Kerbow, 1996).
- ✓ Classroom instruction in schools with higher mobility rates is more likely to be review oriented and have slower instructional pacing from month to month and grade to grade (Kerbow, 1996).
- ✓ High school students who change schools are at least twice as likely **not** to graduate—research indicates that only 60 percent will graduate (Rumberger, Larson, Ream, & Palardy, 1999).
- ✓ In all income categories, highly mobile students are more likely to be retained a grade than children who do not change schools (Fowler-Finn, 2001).

Transient students are affected most by high student mobility, but the subsequent implications for schools, districts, teachers, and fellow classmates are clear. "During the past two decades the dynamics of economic change, unemployment, eroding tax bases, rising poverty and significant out-migration have disrupted rural and small town America, changing family and societal patterns and forcing educators to rethink approaches" (Stalker, 2001). These dynamics that undoubtedly increase the likelihood of mobility are already topics of conversation among rural administrators and teachers. Understanding how transient students affect the local school and taking steps to minimize mobility and/or its negative implications are issues that must be explored as well.

High mobility can have dramatic effects on school budgets and funding, especially in rural school districts that are typically smaller and grappling for resources. Every time students leave a school, they take funding with them. In addition, high student mobility makes staffing and calendar decisions for the school year extremely difficult (Florida Division of Teaching and Learning, 2002).

"A revolving door of new students forces teachers to devote attention to remedial work rather than new lessons" (Stover, 2000). And because many students arrive without academic records, school officials have difficulty determining proper placement. In fact, schools that experience high mobility—many as much as 70 percent—spend a great deal of time on activities that impede instruction (Fowler-Finn, 2001).

A third issue to consider is that a large number of transient students can pull down the academic performance scores of the entire school. Obviously, if a great number of students are experiencing academic failure, whether from student mobility or other issues, the impact on the school's academic performance as a whole is jeopardized.

Accountability for Academic Success

State and local education agencies are increasingly being held accountable for the education of highly mobile students, whether they are in transition, homeless, or from migrant families. In addition to federal and state initiatives to address this issue, local education agencies must also play a role in ensuring that these children do not "fall through the cracks."

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, reauthorized January 2002, entitles homeless children to a free, appropriate public education. The Act also requires schools to remove barriers to their enrollment, attendance, and success in school. Through Title VII of the McKinney-Vento Act, the EHCY programs set forth policy and procedure to ensure the basic educational protection of students. Specific requirements of the Act are available online (www.nationalhomeless.org/ehcylaw).

Additional Initiatives to Address Mobility

Several initiatives to lessen the negative effects of student mobility on academic achievement are currently underway in a variety of schools and/or districts. For example, The Kids Mobility Project, a program of the Minneapolis Public Schools, strives to make information available to parents and families through outreach, community forums, workshops, printed information, and staff development. After identifying attendance as the strongest predictor of performance (an obvious component of mobility), the district began setting attendance goals for each student. Outreach to the family begins after a certain number of absences occur in an effort to determine the underlying reasons for the absences and to create strategies for improving attendance (Biernat & Jax, 2000). The Minneapolis school district has also adopted a district-wide curriculum to ensure that a child making frequent in-district moves will find his/her new classroom and curriculum about the same as the ones he/she left (Stover).

The Indiana State General Assembly adopted legislation, effective July 2001, that requires every school to include the mobility rate in their School Corporation Annual Performance Report. Focusing on the mobility rate, rather than the stability rate, shows a greater impact on all teachers, students, and schools (Fowler-Finn, 2001).

The Victoria Independent School District in Victoria, Texas, has coordinated strategies to ensure that homeless and mobile students are supported academically, socially, and emotionally. A district parent center is open to any parent in the attendance area. The project also provides neighborhood-based homework centers—staffed by qualified teachers' assistants, and located in safe and clean environments—with free snacks and small computer labs. A certified teacher at each school site serves as a parent liaison responsible for monitoring student attendance, identifying and assisting homeless students, initiating interventions for students with attendance problems, giving parents training seminars and workshops, conducting home visits, and providing parents and students with referrals to community and social services. The parent liaison creates a link between the student, teachers, parents, and community resources (Biernat & Jax, 2000).

The Chicago Panel's "Staying Put" mobility awareness campaign is designed to decrease mobility and improve student transfer processes throughout school systems. The program has been adopted by the Chicago Board of Education and strives to (1) make educators, students, parents, and other community members aware of the academic and social consequences of student mobility; (2) promote the establishment of school-based programs and the dissemination of information about school boards' enrollment policies as an alternative to student transfers to other schools; and (3) ensure that the transfer process, when necessary, reduces the disruptions to student learning and achievement (Chicago Panel on School Policy, 2002).

In Dallas, Texas, where schools are experiencing up to a 40 percent student turnover rate, several resources have been put into place. One particular program focuses attention on the children of migrant workers. Program staff members track children, counsel families, provide tutoring, oversee a summer school for migrant families, and put needy parents in contact with charities and social service programs. In addition, the schools are connected to the New Generation System, a national network that stores academic information on migrant students so that teachers can quickly assess a new child's educational history (Stover, 2000).

Community schools in Fort Wayne, Indiana, have adopted several practices to address the needs of families moving into or within the school district. Some examples include the following: Families Helping Families is a program at the elementary level that matches new families with volunteer families who have had children in the school for at least two years; every attempt to keep a child in the same school is made when a family moves within the district; new students and families have an opportunity to meet and get to know other students and families at a parent/partner picnic that is held during the summer; many elementary schools offer multiage classes, as well as looping, where the same teacher stays with the class for two or three consecutive years; principals arrange get-togethers over coffee for newly arrived parents and small-group lunches for new students, to foster a smooth transition into the school culture; and individual mentor and tutor programs at all grade levels make personal connections with students (Fowler-Finn, 2001).

Suggestions and Strategies

Additional strategies to reduce the negative effects of student mobility include professional development of school staff; identification of families in need of services; newcomer programs to help students become accustomed to a new environment; effective records-transfer policies; supportive attendance and disciplinary policies; outreach to parents and families regarding programs, policies, and services offered by the school and community.

Professional Development for School Staff

All school staff should receive general awareness training regarding the needs and circumstances of children who are highly mobile. If specific categories of mobile

students are present in an LEA (local education agency), such as migrant or homeless students, additional professional development should be provided in order to increase staff's sensitivity to and understanding of children's circumstances and needs. This is particularly important for staff members who are responsible for enrolling, assessing, and placing newcomer students.

Identification of Families in Need of Services

In rural school districts, the provision of and access to services often may be limited or may stigmatize families who are already struggling to meet their basic food and shelter needs. Rural school districts are uniquely positioned to identify mobile families needing services. Frequent moves or absences may alert school staff to a family crisis, presenting the school with an opportunity to intervene through outreach programs or by providing referrals that can prevent or lower the rate of student mobility and its negative effects. Partnerships with social service agencies can provide school staff with the necessary information and training to identify families in need as well as to develop programs to support students.

Newcomer Programs

Programs to welcome new students and their families can facilitate a smoother transition for the student; provide an opportunity for preliminary academic assessment and placement; foster positive interactions among students, families, and school staff; help parents understand school policies and goals; develop home support systems for learning; encourage family involvement with the school and decision making; and provide families and students with access to useful information about the school and community. Some programs use "buddy systems" to pair a new student with an existing student who can help the newcomer navigate the new building, schedule, and rules.

Effective and Efficient Records Transfer

Schools can facilitate efficient and effective records transfers by educating parents on moving and records-transfer requirements. Since moves can be either sudden or planned, school districts should implement policies that facilitate sending records, requesting records, and following up on records requests. One school district respondent stated that parents fill out a records-transfer request when withdrawing their student. By facilitating records transfers prior to or coinciding with a move, schools can reduce the time it takes for records to reach the student's new school. In the case of receiving a student without records, a preliminary assessment of academic needs can increase accuracy in placement, identify needed academic support, and reduce the likelihood of academic and social disruption.

Supportive Attendance and Disciplinary Policies

Since high mobility is strongly correlated with attendance and behavioral problems, punitive attendance and disciplinary policies can increase the chances of school failure.

After a certain number of absences (altogether or per academic period), a supportive attendance policy is one that initiates certain types of academic and/or social support, or one that encourages meeting with a student and family at a mutually convenient time to review reasons for absences and create a plan for improving attendance. Similarly, a supportive disciplinary policy might initiate an evaluation to determine whether academic and/or social support is needed, as well as begin to provide academic and/or social support during the disciplinary period.

Outreach to Parents and Families

Outreach programs, including home visitation programs, can help parents and families understand school programs and policies as well as community services that might be useful for the family. Again, partnerships with social service agencies help both agencies and schools share and provide helpful information to families. Conducting workshops for and mailing information to all community members casts a wide net for general information about community services and programs. Home visitation programs help to reduce the stigma for families with specific needs while still connecting families with useful services and information.

Conclusion

Student mobility is a growing issue for rural communities. The phenomenon has a proven negative impact on academic achievement for students and for the effective operation of schools and school districts. Reauthorization of ECHY and increased accountability for schools gives priority to the understanding of student mobility and determining ways to reduce its occurrence and/or minimize its negative effects. As many states, communities, and school districts have already demonstrated, there are effective strategies and solutions that can be successfully adopted by virtually any type of school and district, rural or urban.

Additional Resources for Educating Mobile Students

Collaborative for the Study of Migrant Children and Their Families
Migrant Special Education Training Project
School of Education, Room 112, Old Main Building
State University of New York at New Paltz
New Paltz, NY 12561
(845) 257-2836
http://www.newpaltz.edu/collaborative/index.html
The Collaborative seeks to improve delivery of services to migrant children through projects that offer information, resources, and services addressing the needs of migrant children and families. Its Web site provides annotated lists of the following: resources addressing migrant education; organizations providing migrant education resources and services; videos, films, and readings about the migrant experience; and electronic lists and news sources about migrant education programs in various states and regions.

Easing the Impact of Student Mobility: Welcoming and Social Support
From *Addressing Barriers to Learning, 2*(4), Fall 1997
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/easimp.htm
This article discusses welcoming and social support as a basic element of program quality. The authors identify phases of intervention and key intervention tasks for creating a welcoming school environment and involving students and families in school life. The article also provides an outline of welcoming steps and activities.
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/fall97.htm

ESCORT
State University College at Oneonta
Bugbee Hall
Oneonta, NY 13820
(800) 451-8058
http://www.escort.org
ESCORT is a national resource center on teaching children of migrant farm workers and other English language learners (ELLs). It maintains the National Migrant Education Hotline, which is designed to help migrant children enroll in school and access migrant education program services. ESCORT also conducts professional and program development activities for state and local education agencies and schools. It makes available two online key resources: "Help!" kits for primary and secondary educators of migrant ELLs, and "The Challenge of Educating English Language Learners in Rural Areas" article, which provides examples of strategies used by schools and districts to reduce cultural isolation for ELLs.

Developing Partnerships: A Framework for Family Involvement
National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education (NCPIE)
3929 Old Lee Highway, Suite 91-A
Fairfax, VA 22030-2401
(703) 359-8973

fax:(703) 359-0972
http://www.ncpie.org/DevelopingPartnerships/
NCPIE has provided a framework, policy guidelines, and keys to success for developing effective practices in family involvement. NCPIE is also developing a clearinghouse of resources to provide information about creating and sustaining effective family/school partnerships.

National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE) at SERVE
P.O. Box 5367
Greensboro, NC 27435
(800) 755-3277
http://www.serve.org/nche
NCHE is a national resource center that provides research and information to help educators remove barriers to education for homeless students. The Web site contains state directories of homelessness resources, including advocacy organizations, coordinators, and community awareness resources.

National Coalition for the Homeless (NCH)
1012 Fourteenth Street, NW, #600
Washington, DC 20005-3471
(202) 737-6444
fax:(202) 737-6445
info@nationalhomeless.org
http://www.nationalhomeless.org
NCH provides information about the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, Subtitle VII-B, which is the federal law that entitles homeless children to a free, appropriate public education and requires schools to remove barriers to the homeless students' enrollment, attendance, and success in school. The Web site provides: summaries and analyses of the federal law pertaining to education of homeless students, a directory of state coordinators for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, fact sheets, and K-12 educational materials.

New Generation System
Migrant Education Division
Texas Education Agency
1701 N. Congress Avenue
Austin, TX 78701
(512) 463-9067
fax:(512) 463-9759
http://ngsmigrant.com/index.htm
The New Generation System is a Web-based information network for sharing demographic, educational, and health data on migrant students. The system allows educators to record the movement of migrant students and facilitate academic placement by generating student transfer records.

Out of Reach 2001: America's Growing Wage-Rent Disparity
National Low Income Housing Coalition
1012 Fourteenth Street NW, # 610
Washington, DC 20005-3471
(202) 662-1530
fax: (202) 393-1973
http://www.nlihc.org/oor2001/index.htm
Out of Reach provides income and housing cost data by state, metropolitan area, and county. It calculates the affordability of rental housing, estimates how many households cannot afford to pay their monthly housing costs, and what households would need to earn in order to keep their housing costs affordable (30 percent of household income).

Self-Assessment Guide for Schools
Education of Homeless Children and Youth Program (EHCY)
State House, Room 229
Indianapolis, IN 46204-2798
(317) 232-0590
fax: (317) 233-9293
http://ideanet.doe.state.in.us/alted/homelessassesslinkpg.htm
The Indiana Department of Education Division of Alternative Education and Learning Opportunities has adapted a tool developed by Joseph Johnson, Jr. to help schools evaluate their current services to homeless students. The division has other useful links regarding the education of homeless students.
http://ideanet.doe.state.in.us/alted/homelesslinkpg.htm

Snapshot Assessment System for Migrant, Language-Different, and Mobile Students
By Richard Rangel and Bill Bansberg
Available from:
Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning
2550 S. Parker Road, Suite 500
Aurora, CO 80014
(303) 337-0990
fax:(303) 337-3005
info@mcrel.org
http://www.mcrel.org
The *Snapshot Assessment System* is a diagnostic tool for use by classroom teachers. It includes English and Spanish checklists and instructions and a phonetics guide for nonSpanish speaking teachers. The purpose of the tool is to help teachers identify newcomer students' strengths and weaknesses. The tool provides a series of performance tasks mapped to foundational content standards and benchmarks for students in Grades 1-8.

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